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ABSTRACT

Some private liberal arts colleges across the nation face an increasingly uncertain future as costs continue to rise and competition from expanding public institutions intensifies. Meanwhile, there is pressure-witness the recommendations of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education-to establish 2-year community colleges in areas not now served by such institutions. A solution to both problems may have been found in Ohio, where the newly formed Rio Grande Community College District proposes to contract with Rio Grande College, a private 4-year college, to operate the community college program. If the plans are approved, the four-county community college district stands to avoid the heavy capital expenditures normally involved in setting up a community college and Rio Grande College gains an assured future. (Author)

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Rio Grande: Ohio's 'Piggyback' College

Small private liberal arts colleges across the nation face an increasingly uncertain future as costs continue to rise and competition from expanding public institutions intensifies. Meanwhile, there is pressure—witness the recommendations of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education—to establish two-year community colleges in areas not now served by such institutions. A solution to both problems may have been found in Ohio, where the newly formed Rio Grande Community College District proposes to contract with Rio Grande College, a private four-year college, to operate the community college program. If the plans are approved, the four-county community college district stands to avoid the heavy capital expenditures normally involved in setting up a community college and little Rio Grande College gains an assured future. Their story follows.

The picture was not rosy at Rio Grande College in the fall of 1971. Enrollments, which had reached a peak of about 920 several years earlier, began to fall off during the 1970-'71 academic year and were to drop still further to the current (1972-'73) level of 676, including part-time students. The college's administration attributed the decline to the turndown in the economy, changing popular attitudes toward higher education, and growing competition from low-tuition community colleges and other public institutions in Ohio.

"Like countless other small private colleges and universities," says Dr. Alphus R. Christensen, Rio Grande's president, "we began to wonder whether we would be around in the future."

Ironically, the enrollment slump came just as the college had succeeded in bailing itself out of a crisis that had brought it to near-bankruptcy in the early 1950s. Founded in 1876 in Rio Grande, a hamlet in the rolling, almost rugged hills of southeast Ohio, the college originally was affiliated with the Free Will Baptists and later came under the wing of the American Baptist Convention. But, when the financial crisis loomed and Rio Grande asked the Convention for increased support, it was turned down. Subsequently, it dropped all religious affiliations and went it alone. Disaster was averted when the college's creditors agreed to settle for a fraction of the money owed them and Rio Grande managed to hold its head above water until 1962, when Dr. Christensen took over as president.

At that point in time, the 86-year-old college still was unaccredited, a fact that contributed significantly to its difficulties. Accordingly, the new president set accreditation as the number one goal. To gain it, the college upgraded its staff and physical plant—most significantly, adding an adequate new library and improving its collection—managing to finance all this through increased giving by a strengthened board of trustees, the use of professional fund rasing counsel, and federal assistance.

GENESIS OF AN IDEA

Accreditation was formally granted in March 1969, just in time to herald the college's new crisis. More than two years later, in October 1971, with the enrollment picture at its gloomiest, Dr. Christensen happened to be in Jackson, Ohio, for a meeting with John F. Stiffler, Sr., executive committee chairman of Rio Grande's board of trustees. Stiffler, president of Stiffler Stores, a chain of small department stores in southeast Ohio, told Dr. Christensen that a group of Jackson residents had asked him whether a federal manpower training facility in town might not be converted into a community college.

As Dr. Christensen tells it, Stiffler's remark triggered an idea and, as soon as the meeting ended, he drove the 20-odd miles to his campus office and began to search the chapters on community colleges, technical institutes, and the Ohio Board of Regents in the Ohio Revised Code. The search convinced him that a community college district could be set up in the region, provided the district had the legal population base of at least 75,000, and that such a district legally could contract with a private institution, such as Rio Grande, to operate its community college.

Dr. Christensen proceeded to check with the North

Central Association of Schools and Colleges to make sure such an arrangement would not jeopardize Rio Grande's accreditation, then took his idea to Dr. John Millet, then chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents and now vice president and director of the Management Division, Academy for Educational Development. The concept, Dr. Millet concluded, had merit, provided it was legal. Further meetings with legal and educational experts established that it indeed was legal and Dr. Christensen took the plan to his board, where it received wholehearted approval.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL PHASE

Under the Ohio code, there are two ways to create a community college. The first is by petition and referendum. The second route involves having the boards of commissioners of the county or counties comprising the proposed district adopt a joint resolution requesting the Ohio Board of Regents to recognize the existence of the new district. The latter course seemed to offer fewer difficulties and was adopted.

To meet the population-base requirement, it was decided that the new district should include four contiguous counties—Gallia, Jackson, Meigs, and Vinton—having a total population in excess of 82,000. With the help of prominent citizens of all four counties, the county boards of commissioners were approached with the proposal and, on January 14, 1972, a joint resolution was adopted unanimously, calling for creation of the new district and a contractual arrangement under which the community college would be operated by Rio Grande. The joint resolution was submitted to the Board of Regents, which, on June 16, 1972, adopted its own resolution recognizing the existence of the new district.

Rio Grande, meanwhile, obtained a supplemental federal grant of $25,000 and undertook, with the assistance of Arthur D. Little, Inc., a Cambridge, Massachusetts, consulting firm, and a newly-formed citizen's advisory committee, a study of the feasibility of the new district and of the contractual approach to its operation.

The Regents resolution did not mean that the new community college could open its doors. A nine-member board of trustees—six appointed by the boards of county commissioners and three by the governor—had to be selected and, as required by law, an official community college plan drawn up outlining the need for a community college program, its desirable characteristics, and proposed arrangements for its administration and financing.

Such a plan was drawn up, leaning heavily on the favorable findings of the Arthur D. Little study, "Four-County Survey of Community College Program Possibilities," and submitted in February 1973 for approval by the Board of Regents. Action on the plan was tabled by the Board at a meeting on April 13. No reason for tabling was announced, but there has been speculation that the board preferred to delay action until a newly appointed permanent chancellor to replace Dr. Millett takes office on July 1.

Meanwhile, there remained the possibility that the board might reject the plan as submitted—in which case, a new plan could be drawn up and submitted—or even that it might reject the contractual concept in its entirety. Supporting that possibility is the fact that there has been opposition from other public institutions in the state, opposition that, according to Dr. Christensen, has not "surfaced."

However, two institutions, Hocking Technical College and Scioto Technical College are located on the periphery of the new district and have argued that no point in the new district is more than 30 minutes' drive from their campuses. Dr. Christensen points out that neither institution is within 30 minutes of Gallipolis, the district's largest community, and that their technically-oriented programs would not meet all the educational needs of district residents.

Meanwhile, Ohio University has indicated it is interested in annexing Rio Grande and converting it into a branch campus. The Regents are known to prefer a two-year institution for the area but did adopt a resolution calling for a meeting between O.U. and Rio Grande officials. Such a meeting was held and, according to Dr. Christensen, O.U. took the position that, although it would have liked to annex Rio Grande, the community college concept already embarked upon should be pursued. In a subsequent letter to Dr. Millett, Dr. Claude Sowle, O.U.'s president, said O.U. had no objection to the community college, "provided it is understood that there will not automatically be favorable action on the educational plan when it is submitted and that the plan would be considered only after it is determined that a suitable agreement with Ohio University cannot be worked out."

But Rio Grande, Dr. Christensen stresses, will not consent to annexation by O.U. or any other institution. "We don't want to disappear," he commented, "as have many other private institutions." Meanwhile, Rio Grande will do its best to convince the Regents that the area can support a community college and that the plan, as submitted, "is a good thing to do."

THE CASE FOR APPROVAL

And Rio Grande has a good deal going for it in its

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campaign for approval. The four-country area clearly is in need of the kind of educational services provided by a community college. Population in the primarily rural four-county area has been declining since the turn of the century. Employment opportunities in the area's light manufacturing, transportation, and service industries have been limited, prompting young people to migrate elsewhere in search of satisfactory jobs. Poverty levels are substantially higher for the state as a whole, as are the death rate and the percentage of broken homes.

The educational need is indicated by the fact that the area's percentage of youth continuing their education beyond high school is relatively low and the number per 1,000 attending college considerably below that for the state as a whole, as is the median level of education for residents aged 25 or older. Meanwhile, surveys of local industry and businesses indicate that there is a demand for manpower having the skills offered in the proposed community college program.

Rio Grande already offers one two-year associate degree program, in medical laboratory technology, in cooperation with the Holzer Medical Center and Ohio Valley Health Services. And, according to Dr. Herman Koby, dean for academic affairs, it has always been an "open door" institution and a community-oriented institution, much in the community college tradition. Area residents consistently have accounted for at least 50 per cent of the college's enrollment. Until very recently, 90 per cent of its students majored in education and the large numbers of its graduates went into teaching in area school systems.

The college's open door policy is based on the premise that all deserve an opportunity for a higher education and that all can benefit even if, in some cases, the benefits are limited. Accordingly, the only entrance requirement is a high school diploma or equivalent. The policy has resulted in the need for remedial programs, which have been offered for about ten years and which for the past year or two have been producing successfully. Approximately a third of the college's students require varying amounts of remedial work, a fact attributed by college officials to the relatively impoverished budgets of local school systems. It might be noted that 6 to 7 per cent of the college's student body is black, as compared to the 3- to 4-per cent black population in the area. Many of the college's black students come from the cities of Columbus, Dayton, and Cincinnati.

A BRIGHTER FUTURE

Meanwhile, there are signs that the four-county area is about to undergo a dramatic economic revitalization, one that will enhance its ability to support a community college and create greater demand for its graduates. The upturn is being sparked by development of a huge, $600 million power plant and coal mine complex in Gallia and Meigs Counties. A recent study indicated that the complex will create 2,600 new jobs by 1976 and

Rio Grande College's main entrance.

generate another 6,000 by 1980. And the area's population is expected to increase by 18,000 over the next seven years.

Meanwhile, at the request of the community college district, Rio Grande is taking positive steps to convince the Board of Regents of the viability of the community college plan. Grants of up to $1,000 are being offered to any entering freshmen from the four-county area and, to date, the college has recruited 85 or more, as compared to the 29 or 30 normally enrolled by July 1. The goal is to triple area-student enrollments.

If the Regents approve, the community college could open its doors in the fall of 1974 with an enrollment of between 950 and 1,267 depending on whether the estimate is conservative or liberal, according to the Little report. The report projects a gradual decline in enrollments in succeeding years but, it should be noted, did not take into account the economic upturn and consequent population increases mentioned earlier.

COLLEGES IN TANDEM

Whatever the community-college enrollment level, Rio Grande expects to continue operation as a four-year private institution. About 15 per cent of the college's students now are from out of state and it is expected that such students, who will not be eligible to attend the community college, will continue to attend the private institution. Since all Ohio residents are eligible to attend any community college in the state, at slightly higher fees than district residents, the balance of freshmen and sophomores is expected to be enrolled in the community college. The community college fees initially will be $405 per year for area residents, and $480 for other Ohio residents. In contrast, yearly tuition at Rio Grande is $1,700.

The community college will offer Associate of Arts, Associate of Science, Associate of Business, and Associate of Applied Sciences degrees and, as is usual in community colleges, both terminal and college or university transfer programs. The existing faculty will

teach many of the community college courses in addition to those for the private institution, so that only three to five new teachers will have to be added for the first year of community college operation.

Financing of the community college operation will be covered by a 1 mil tax levy in the four counties. The levy, which must be approved by the voters following Board of Regents approval of the plan, is expected to yield between $275,000 and $300,000 a year, according to the Little report. But college officials indicate that the impact of the new power plant development on the tax base will increase that figure to about $500,000.

THE INSTANT CAMPUS

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the Rio Grande plan is the fact that the community college district will enjoy a minimum capital investment in creating its new campus. For the first two years of operation, the community college will require only the creation of additional parking spaces and rehabilitation of one existing building to provide guidance and counseling and developmental/compensatory education services, at a total cost of $225,000. All other functions can be accommodated in existing facilities.

Ultimately, if enrollment projections are borne out, a new library wing, a student life center, and a technology building will have to be constructed, at a total estimated cost of $1.5 million. In contrast, Dr. Christensen estimates that a new campus for the community college, if started from scratch, would cost at least $10 million.

As far as can be determined, the Rio Grande plan is a first for the nation. Public universities often have contracted with private institutions to provide programs and even to operate specialized schools. But, according to Dr. Christensen, Rio Grande marks the first time the contractual route has been employed to provide facilities and programs for a community college. A check with the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges produced no evidence to the contrary.

Dr. James Wattenburger, professor of education at the University of Florida at Gainesville and an expert on community colleges, said he had heard of numerous proposals for similar solutions but could not recall that any had been carried out.

FLUKE OR PROTOTYPE?

At first glance, the Rio Grande plan would appear to offer an important new precedent both for struggling private colleges and for new or expanding community college districts. However, there may be legal roadblocks to application of the solution elsewhere. The Ohio Revised Code specifically gives a community college district the option to operate its own campus (or campuses) and programs or to contract to have them operated by "an established public university or college." The appropriate code section states specifically that the term "public university or college" applies to any non-profit university or college "open to the public on equal terms and which is not affiliated with or controlled by an organization that is not primarily educational in nature." Clearly, Rio Grande qualifies.

But a check with Dr. Wattenburger indicated that the legal picture is less clear in other states. Applicable laws, he said, vary considerably from state to state. Some have outright prohibitions against contractual arrangements with private institutions, while others have passed special legislation encouraging Rio Grande-type solutions. And he noted that it is always possible to amend the laws in states now prohibiting such solutions.

Moreover, Dr. Wattenburger pointed out, the federal government, under both the Vocational Education Act of 1963 and the Education Amendments Act of 1973, is actively encouraging contractual arrangements for the operation of programs. Rio Grande indeed may be an important prototype for the future of a significant segment of American higher education.

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MEANWHILE, ELSEWHERE IN OHIO . . .

At press time, it was learned that tiny Western College, across the state in Oxford, Ohio, was about to be taken over by state-supported Miami University, "its big neighbor across the street," as the New York *Times* put it. Western, a private institution enrolling only 340 students, has not enjoyed a deficit-free year since 1964 and, according to Dr. William C. Spencer, its president, the fund raising effort required to save Western and increase its enrollment to a fiscally sound 750 would be "preposterous" for a college of its size. The alternative: public affiliation with Miami.

The agreement with Miami will permit 120-year-old Western—formerly known as Western College for Women—to retain some elements of its identity, probably as an experimental college within the university. The agreement calls for the merger to take place by the fall of 1974. Western students, who now pay $2,720 a year in tuition, will pay the same rate as Miami students, $780 for Ohioans and $1,980 for out-of-state residents.